

223rd Engineer Battalion: 'We were in the middle of it'

Lee Johnson is a history major at East Mississippi Community College in Scooba, where he is a member of the Lion's Pride Marching Band. He is an associate minister at Lower Prairie Creek Missionary Baptist Church — and says he enjoys being around "positive people." He hopes one day to be a teacher.



Johnson

His story is about 1st Sgt. Bobby Jones of the 223rd Engineer Battalion. Bobby has been a member of the Mississippi Army National Guard for 33 years and has served in Italy, Germany, South Korea, Nicaragua, Kuwait and Iraq.

By Lee Johnson
special to The Star

Bobby Jones is the physical plant director for East Mississippi Community College's Scooba campus. But, he's also a 1st sergeant of the 223rd Engineer Battalion Headquarters Company of the Mississippi Army National Guard in West Point.

He returned to Scooba in March 2004 after spending 14 months in Iraq.

For his service and dedication in Iraq, he received a Bronze Star from Gen. Raymond Odierno, commander of the 4th Infantry Division, which received credit for capturing Saddam Hussein.

"First Sgt. Jones' resourcefulness, experience and organizational skills assured the successful mobilization and deployment during combat operations," said Command Sgt. Maj. Thomas Ales, who recommended Jones for the award.

Jones first spent six weeks at Fort Campbell, Ky., before being deployed to Kuwait to become part of the 4th



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CONSTRUCTION KNOW-HOW

When the 223rd Engineer Battalion arrived at Camp Spiker in Iraq, the soldiers had no mess halls or showers. "We slept on the ground, had to eat MRE's three times a day, and showered every fourth day with bottled water," 1st Sgt. Bobby Jones said. "We found a well, pumped our own water and hooked up generators. We were the first company on that post to have our own showers, cold drinks and electricity."

Infantry Division from Ft. Hood, Texas. The convoy then moved into Tikrit, Iraq.

The troops slept only a few hours at a time until they reached their destination, Camp Spiker, named for a Gulf War soldier whose plane was shot down there.

The 223rd Engineer Battalion built roads, checkpoints, schools and hospitals, repaired runways and installed flotation bridges. Until the 223rd arrived, the soldiers had no mess halls or showers. Of the 550 troops of the 223rd Battalion, 200 were under Jones' command.

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water," Jones said.

"We found a well, pumped our own water and hooked up generators. We were the first company on that post to have our own showers, cold drinks and electricity."

The base was often shelled at night. Several people in the company received Purple Hearts. One soldier was killed when a roadside bomb exploded.

There was danger wherever you went over there," Jones said. "I have two vehicles that had damage from bombs. A rocket-launched grenade was fired into the back of one of our 5-ton trucks and an Iraqi civilian was killed. We were right in the middle of it the whole time."

Jones' battalion was the first to write contracts to employ local civilian contractors. The battalion at times would guard up to 50 contractors while they worked. Jones said local civilians were not hostile.

"They would warn us when there was trouble brewing and would tell us when we shouldn't go into town or on a highway," he said.

Jones also did engineering jobs in several locations in North Iraq, including taking dozers, dump trucks and front-end loaders out into the country to train Iraqi police.

East Mississippi Community College students, faculty and staff are glad to have him home safe!

Her son surpassed all expectations

Sandra Terry submitted this "Bragging Rights" story about her son, Spc. John Leslie Cummings of Philadelphia — a member of the Mississippi Army National Guard's 185th Aviation Group, Company G, in Meridian.

John was activated in December 2003 and left for Iraq in January 2004. Sandra also has a step-brother in the unit, Sgt. Ronnie Payne, who is a pilot and medic. As you read this story, both may already be home. The 185th was expected to return in two waves in February and March.

By Sandra Terry
special to The Star

I want to brag on my son, Spc. John Leslie Cummings, because he is special,

unique, gifted, talented and creative in his own way. He has displayed courage, honor and dignity during his tour of duty in Iraq.

He is one of those who went to protect the world in the interest of freedom and peace for all mankind. He has shown bravery in time of conflict, unwavering dedication and willingness to fight for the cause of freedom.

Many have also shown these qualities and overcome problems acquired due to war. Not all, however are my son.

My heart is filled with memories of a little boy mischievous, loving, caring and precious. As he grew, I attempted to teach him to be good and always helpful to other people, to be fair and treat

others equally, to have a positive attitude, to make things right when they were wrong, to know himself, to set goals and to work hard to accomplish them.

I tried to teach him to explore, to laugh, to appreciate all God has provided, to form friendships with good people and always be a good friend, to appreciate family, listen to his heart, adhere to his values and stand up for his beliefs.

He has surpassed anything I could have expected of him. All the wishing, all the praying has paid off.

In my eyes, my son is returning as an American hero. I am so proud of him.